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AN ESSAY*
ON
THE EDUCATION OF THE EYE
WITH REFERENCE TO
PAINTING.

Illustrated by Copper Plates and Wood-cuts.

By JOHN BURNET, F.R.S.,†

AUTHOR OF "PRACTICAL HINTS ON PAINTING."

"Visual impressions are those which in infancy furnish the principal means of developing the powers of the understanding; it is to this class of principles that the philosopher resorts for the most apt and perspicuous illustrations of his reasoning, and it is also from the same inexhaustible fountain that the poet draws his most pleasing and graphic as well as his sublimest imagery."—*Dr. Roget's Bridgewater Treatise.*

PREFACE.‡

IN prefacing a work of this brief description, where so many branches of the Art of Painting are introduced with little more than an enumeration of their component parts, I ought to apologize, in the first instance, for thus attempting to convey any information which can be carried into practical usefulness in so small a compass. My motive for so doing was to give, if possible, an insight into the intricacies of the art, without distracting the attention of the reader by a multitude of examples, whose union often destroys the strong impression of a single illustration. Though the varieties of painting are endless, yet the properties of which these varieties are composed are, as in music, few in number; I have endeavored, therefore, to notice only the leading principles, which must be known, and which by reflection and observation can be extended to an infinite series of ramifications. The same simple rules which should regulate the instruction of beginners, I have endeavored to point out as existing in the highest departments of the art, communicating by their presence that value which a vein of gold imparts to a mass of inferior matter. To some it may appear that the subject is too physically treated. I have been actuated to do so by the custom of the present time, and surely every one ought to know something of the construction of that instrument he is in possession of, and of its operations on the mind. In what I have advanced I have quoted the opinions of the best authors to corroborate and strengthen my own, thereby hoping to render an art by which civilized society is so highly embellished more known and appreciated.

* Burnet's famous art books were published under the general head of "A Treatise on Painting, in Four Parts, consisting of an Essay on the Education of the Eye, with reference to Painting, and Practical Hints on Composition, Chiaroscuro and Colour." The book was illustrated by examples from the Italian, Venetian, Flemish and Dutch schools, and published by James Carpenter, of Old Bond St., in 1835. The entire work was dedicated to Sir Thomas Lawrence, then President of the Royal Academy, the "Essay on the Education of the Eye" being specially inscribed "to William Allen, R.A., Member of the Scottish Academy and Master of the Trustees' Academy for Encouraging the Arts and Manufactures of Scotland."—[Ed. A. U.]

† John Burnet was born at Fisherrow, near Edinburgh, in 1781. He "developed an early talent in art," according to his biographies, and began his study at the Trustees' Academy in his native city. He at the same time was bound apprentice to Robert Scott, a noteworthy engraver of his time, and in due course became a master of the line as well as the brush. He never abandoned either art, relying on that of the engraver for money and that of his easel for fame. It was his engravings of Sir David Wilkie's works which first brought him into prominence and made him the leading engraver of his time. Burnet would probably have been a better painter if he had not been so thoroughly a master of the burin as to bring his skill in that art into constant demand. He painted a number of pictures, however, the most noteworthy of which is probably the "Greenwich Pensioners receiving News of the Battle of Trafalgar," which he engraved himself. He went to London early in life, and made his artistic *début* there with a set of engravings in illustration of Mrs. Inchbald's "British Theatre" and other popular works. The first important picture engraved by him was after Wilkie's "Jew's Harp." All of his plates are highly esteemed by collectors and bring large prices. He died in 1868. —[Ed. A. U.]

‡ Burnet was a very enthusiastic devotee of art for its own sake, and a most diligent and indefatigable student. He was a man of many practical ideas as well, and his knowledge of the fundamental facts of art, and his clear and intelligible common sense in developing his ideas, made him a popular teacher and lecturer. His first work was the one whose republication we herewith commence. He also published, in 1840, an essay on "Rembrandt and His Works," and in 1858, in association with Peter Cunningham, a life and criticism of the works of J. W. M. Turner. These were all labors of love with him, on which he lavished valuable time, both in writing and illustrating them. They sold extensively in their time, and are now among the precious rarities of our collectors. They are devoid of literary style and abound in rather stilted construction and delivery; but are so true, so full of wisdom, sound sense and commanding knowledge, that they are accepted as the most valuable productions of the kind ever given from the press. —[Ed. A. U.]

PART I.
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CONTENTS.

Measurement.—Form.—Perspective.—Lines.—Diminution.—Angles.—Circles.—Aerial Perspective.—Chiaro Oscuro.—Invention.—Composition.—Arrangement.—Harmony.—Form.—Chiaro Oscuro.—Harmony of Colour.—Studying from Nature.

IN a country so largely connected with manufactures as this is, we cannot but wonder why the education of the eye has not been more generally cultivated; observing, as is also the case with the ear, that its education in after life rarely gives the possessor those advantages which result from a proper direction having been given in youth; nor do I see why drawing should not accompany the elements of reading and writing, the complicated forms of the letters in many languages presenting a more serious obstacle than what is required in the rudiments of drawing; and I have no doubt but that a very short time would be sufficient to enable a scholar to draw objects with tolerable correctness.

Without this education, not only are the most valuable advantages often lost,* but the mind is deprived of one of its chief sources of correct information, and the hand remains in a manner paralyzed and unable to record what the eye takes cognizance of; whereas when they advance in mutual contact through a course of early instruction, this difficulty is overcome. This ready execution of the hand is to be acquired only by constant practice; for, however readily the eye may perceive the form of an object, the power of delineating it on the paper or the canvas is where the apparent difficulty lies, it is here where its correctness is put to the test; how much constant practice perfects this chain of communication between the eye and the hand, may be proved by the facility with which a person acquires the practice of writing in the dark or with his eyes shut. This quick communication, however, is not to be purchased at the expense of correctness, which ought to be the greatest consideration; for, if the eye, or ear, falls into a loose, imperfect method of study, the student finds the greatest difficulty in getting rid of such unprofitable groundwork. In adding the vacating advantages of this branch of education it is not my province to raise up chimeras, or what might be considered sufficient reasons for deferring it. Those who have the instruction of youth entrusted to them I am confident would find it rather an assistance, as it might be given either as an amusement or a reward of merit; and, in order to put it in the power of any master to instruct, I shall endeavour to proceed in the simplest manner, and with as few diagrams as the subject renders necessary.†

[CONTINUED NEXT MONTH.]

* Locke, whose attention was turned to this branch of education, says, "When he can write well and quick, I think it may be convenient, not only to continue the exercise of his hand in writing, but also to improve the use of it further in drawing, a thing very useful to gentlemen on several occasions, but especially if he travels, as that which helps a man often to express in a few lines well put together what a whole sheet of paper in writing would not be able to represent and make intelligible. How many buildings may a man see, how many machines and habits meet with, the ideas whereof would be easily retained and communicated by a little skill in drawing, which being committed to words are in danger of being lost, or at best but ill retained in the most exact descriptions? I do not mean that I would have your son a perfect painter—to be that to any tolerable degree will require more time than a young gentleman can spare from his other improvements of greater moment; but so much insight into perspective and skill in drawing as will enable him to represent tolerably on paper anything he sees may, I think, be got in a little time."—*Locke's Thoughts concerning Education.*

† With regard to the practice of drawing, it will be proper to incite the scholars to industry by showing in other books the use of the art, and informing them how much it assists the apprehension and relieves the memory, and if they are obliged sometimes to write descriptions of engines, utensils or any complex pieces of workmanship, they will more fully apprehend the necessity of an expedient which so happily supplies the defects of language and enables the eye to receive what cannot be conveyed to the mind in any other way."—*Preface to the Preceptor.*

‡ The large number of Burnet's diagrams, and their necessity and value to his work, render the preparation of this publication a quite serious matter. We judge it advisable, in view of delays in the reproduction of the illustrations, to break off here, as the observations which follow demand elucidation by drawings. In our next issue the subjects of measurement, form, perspective, lines diminution, angles and circles will be fully treated and illustrated.—[Ed. A. U.]